

CANNIBALISM AND EASTER ISLAND: EVALUATION, DISCUSSION OF PROBABILITIES, AND SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON THE SUBJECT

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"You should be told the difference between empiricism and stubbornness".
— Mr. Spock to Dr. McCoy, *Star Trek*,
"Conscience of the King"

DENIAL, THE EASY WAY OUT

IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE to discuss cannibalism¹ on Easter Island without first discussing cannibalism in general – largely because the subject of cannibalism is sensitive and controversial. And, especially since the publication of William Arens's book *The Man-Eating Myth* in 1979, a number of anthropologists and other scientists have come to question if cannibalism has occurred on the kind of scale suggested by early reports from around the world. As an extremist of sorts, Arens asserts that cannibalism as a custom has never occurred because he dismisses the veracity of all reports others have taken for granted, an assertion that almost seems to be driven more by a revulsion for the practice than for an unbiased examination of the evidence. Just as some people are a bit too eager to believe cannibalism occurs, perhaps because it provokes both horror and curiosity, others are so disturbed by the idea that they'd rather believe it just never occurs.

Arens claims that since "no one has ever observed this purported cultural universal" (i.e., cannibalism), we must be skeptical about its actual existence. But the history of anthropology – indeed, of science and society – can demonstrate numerous examples of cultural practices that exist or have existed and for which there is little doubt about their legitimacy even if we haven't seen them personally. Masturbation in monasteries, homosexuality in military ranks, and incest (more on this below) are observable phenomena in theory, but that doesn't make them necessarily accessible to direct observation – or that the absence of Polaroid pictures of these events constitutes proof they never happened. As Turner, et al. (1992) have said, "the lack of eye-witnesses is why we do archaeology in the first place". In a similar vein, Diamond (1997) has observed that:

...any society has practices considered acceptable in private but inappropriate to practice in public, in the presence either of anyone else...or of non-clan members. The abundance of New Guinea babies, my knowledge that babies are conceived by sexual intercourse, and second-hand accounts persuade me that New Guineans practice sex, but I have no first-hand observations of it even after many years there.

Besides, under these circumstances what *wouldn't* constitute an eye-witness account, excerpt perhaps a film documentary? And even there, applying Arens' view, we'd have

to be unduly skeptical about any possible manipulation of the sound or picture. Arens criticizes one of the most famous, early, first-hand accounts in the history of cannibalism – that of Hans Staden who lived among the Brazilian Tupinambá for most of a year in the 16th century – by claiming that Staden didn't live among the Tupinambá long enough to accurately report their rituals and practices. Just what constitutes "long enough" isn't clear, even though the better part of a year



A European view of cannibalism in the New World (based on a 1497 woodcut).

sounds like a decent amount of time to me.

Scientific theories advance through the falsification of hypotheses; simply proposing alternative explanations is insufficient methodology in rejecting an explanation. So it should come as no surprise that Arens is unable to uncover adequate, satisfactory, or reliable documentation of cannibalism (his words). Perhaps his criteria is too rigid, otherwise we'd have to believe that, despite reports from all corners of the globe (from the Pacific, North America, sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central America, and the Mediterranean²), some forms of cannibalism exist but not those that Arens believes do not. Surely we should be able to differentiate be-

tween generalized, sometimes hyperbolic descriptions of hapless South Seas travelers tied up in giant cooking pots, and detailed descriptions like this one from McElroy (1996):

After (a) funeral was over, other women of the village prepared the body for cooking. The flesh, viscera, and brains were steamed with vegetables in bamboo tubes or in an earth oven with hot stones.

It may be that Arens, like others, is so uncomfortable with the idea that humans would engage in cannibalism that he would prefer to find evidence to convince himself it never occurs and thus feel better about his involvement with the Human Condition – cannibalism being an “inhuman, hellish brutality”, according to Dafoe’s Robinson Crusoe, proof of “the horror of degeneracy of humane nature”. I’m not alone in this speculation: Krabacher (1980) describes Arens’ argument as one that results more from the author’s personal convictions and too little from the product of careful research (which is borne out below); indeed, Arens has stated rather boldly that “Anthropology is stuck with cannibals, but I for one am not” (Osborne 1997). But the choice is not Arens’ to make – any more than when he said, “Like the poor, cannibals are always with us, but happily beyond the possibility of actual observation”. Arens, clearly, has never been to the inner city. And this bias is obviously strong, potentially influential, and is not unique to Arens. The very title of a chapter in Peter Bullock’s 1998 book *Deciphering Anasazi Violence* betrays as much: “Does the Reality of Anasazi Violence Prove the Myth of Anasazi Cannibalism?”. *Myth*? Glad to have that settled. Similarly, the title of an article by Bahn (1990) conveys the author’s personal conviction on the subject: “Eating People Is Wrong”. Wrong by whose standards? If we enlightened scholars today abhor the notion that “cannibal” has been used as a term of derision, especially to justify brutalizing (or Christianizing) “primitive” people, why are we judging the practice, whether it occurred frequently or not, as a bad thing? Should we also dismiss as primitive and repulsive the Catholic Eucharist, which has been likened through the concept of transubstantiation³ to be a cannibalistic rite? As Lestringant (1997) notes, these moral objections, “under the cover of idealism and intellectual high-mindedness, actually lead back to misrepresentations” of the people whose story we’re trying to report accurately for a change. Harris (1985) is more harsh but no less poignant; “The real conundrum”, he says, “is why we who live in a society which is constantly perfecting the art of mass-producing human bodies on the battlefield find humans good to kill but bad to eat”. Actually, Harris is merely echoing an observation made by the 16th century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne:

I am not so much anxious that we should note the horrible savagery of these acts that, whilst judging their faults so correctly, we should be so blind to our own. I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead; to tear by rack and torturing a body still full of feeling, to roast it by degrees, and then give it to be trampled and eaten by dogs and swing – a practice which we have not

only read about but seen within recent memory, not between ancient enemies, but between neighbors and fellow-citizens and, what is worse, under the cloak of piety and religion – than to roast and eat a man after he is dead. ...We are justified therefore in calling these people (the Tupinambá) barbarians by reference to the laws of reason, but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity.

So, yes, following Lestringant’s observations, the most convenient and most radical solution is simply to deny cultural anthropophagy – a new easy way out. For example, Bullock (1998) concludes that causes and motivations of violence *vis-a-vis* cannibalism are “not obvious”. But this approach is a cop-out. There are plenty of examples of violence in a cannibalistic context (or cannibalism in a violent context). Shane Baker (1994) discusses as many as thirty throughout New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Arizona. Among Central American peoples, and those of Ecuador and southern Colombia, as well as north Colombian lowlands, cannibalism and the taking of slaves were two described motives for warfare (Steward & Faron 1959; Petrinovich 2000). Harris (1985) notes that, regardless of whether the Maori believed that they were acquiring *mana*, serving the need for revenge, addressing an ailment, or merely pleasure, human flesh *is* nutritious and thus cannibalism may have been a useful practice in war. Famines were said to have provoked cannibalism in China, Russia, Japan⁴, and in Nazi concentration camps, but all under the umbrella of war. Ritual cannibalism, often with a tinge of violence, has also been observed in Africa (Zandelande, central Africa; Sierra Leone, west Africa; Belgian Congo), South America (Tupinambá, eastern Brazil; Jivaro, Ecuador; Cauca Valley of western Columbia; Guayaki, Paraguay), and the New Hebrides (Fiji and Maori; Malekula – which became Vanuatu; Foré of Papua, New Guinea; Bimin-Kuskusmin of Papua, New Guinea). Nor do we have to engage in a “blame game” to recognize the potential prevalence of cannibalism regardless of what motivates it. In short, we would be better off following Beth Conklin’s “healthier, more realistic approach”:

to recognize that various peoples, including western Europeans, have consumed human body substances for different reasons in different times and places. Let’s try to recognize the positive, not just negative meanings of these practices.

With perhaps good intentions, Arens labors heavily on the idea that “many peoples accuse (usually erroneously) their neighbors of cannibalistic practices in order to stress their own human qualities” (Rivière, 1980) – but this is scarcely something anthropologists have failed to appreciate. Moreover, there are in fact numerous New Guinea ethnographies that do *not* attribute cannibalism to the people with whom they deal – a fact that Arens should find embarrassing, says Goldman, et al. (1999) given Arens’s motivation in explaining the “cannibal complex”. If we should take anything of intrinsic value from Arens, it is not whether he has uncovered suffi-

cient evidence to deny allegations of cannibalism but whether anthropologists have upheld sufficient standards of care in avoiding biases and in accurately reporting the facts.

It is thus ironic that Arens isn't particularly accurate in his assertions. As Krabacher (1980) has noted, Arens maintains that no Spanish chroniclers ever witnessed Aztec cannibalism, but this overlooks the eyewitness reports of 15th- and 16th-century historian Bernal Diaz. Arens says that Bernardino de Sahagun's *Florentine Codex*⁵ fails to show Aztec cannibalism among its hundreds of illustrations depicting various aspects of indigenous culture, but one illustration in particular undeniably depicts cannibalism (one man is eating a human thigh while a human head boils in a nearby pot) (Sahlins 1979). Similarly, Arens cites a statement by Livingstone that he is unconvinced by reports of cannibalism for a particular African people – yet Arens fails to mention other journal entries where Livingstone is convinced of the practice by other groups. Arens states in his "Rethinking Anthropophagy" (1998) that Poole's report of Bimin-Kukusmin cannibalism⁶ is to his knowledge the only detailed description published of eyewitness accounts of cannibalism in the anthropological literature. Given the existence of reports that refute this position, what this really means is Arens' knowledge is fairly limited – or his definition of "detailed" is extremely restrictive.

Arens also claims that the collected documents of the Jesuit missionaries (known as *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*⁷) "do not contain an eyewitness description of the latter deed". Yet, as Peggy R. Sanday has observed, the source Arens uses for his assertion is only Volume 5 of a 40-volume set. Several of the other volumes contain eyewitness descriptions (e.g., Volumes 13, in which the Jesuits write of encountering Indians carrying parts of a human body on a skewer; or Volume 17, where a priest writes that one of the hands of a tortured victim was thrown into his cabin. This priest also writes of a prisoner who, after torture and death, was boiling in a kettle "of which the inmates of the Fathers' cabin were invited to come and take their share"; there's also an explicit report of the ingestion of human flesh in Volume 39, despite Arens' assertion that these accounts do not exist (Abler 1980)).

The Jesuits, Arens claims, invented their accounts because they, like other contemporary stories of cannibalism, related the same details in much the same way, as if they were copying from earlier sources. Arens also doubts the Jesuits because he doesn't believe they had sufficient time to learn local "cannibal" languages and thus couldn't accurately

describe what they had been told. Perhaps it hasn't occurred to Arens that many rituals (the litany of the Catholic mass, for example, or the Pledge of Allegiance in the U.S.) or even a popular song by Britney Spears involve a repetitive, traditional set of mannerisms and enunciations, such that they would actually be expected to be described similarly by different people rather than the by-product of intended or accidental plagiarism. Even so, Arens is mistaken again because, according to Donald Forsyth, the Jesuits *did* speak the local languages (like Tupi), even preparing dictionaries and grammars to help others learn the language. The Jesuits pressured civil authorities to create and enforce laws to eradicate cannibalism. Why would they waste their time doing so unless cannibalism was actually pervasive? Since the Jesuits, unlike the Portuguese, eschewed exploitation of the Indians and often found themselves at odds with colonists over the subject, it seems unlikely they would have participated in a plot to spread the *fiction* of cannibalism. What would they have to gain?

The Jesuits lived in Indian villages for extended periods of time. If the Tupinambá did not practice cannibalism, Forsyth (1983) asserts

numerous experienced and knowledgeable Jesuits lied outright. They lied in their letters to friends and associates. They lied in their letters to their superiors. They lied in reports to their order. They even lied in their letters to one another. And they did so consistently, without qualification or exception, over more than half a century.

Referring again to Forsyth (1983), in order to accept Arens' thesis, we must believe that for more than seventy-five years, Jesuits and non-Jesuits alike, many of whom had lived among the Indians, spoke their language, and observed their customs, continued to assert that cannibalism was practiced, with no protest whatsoever:

(I)f we cannot believe the voluminous testimony, full of painstaking detail, that anthropophagy was indeed practiced, how can we possibly believe *anything* these people had to say about Indian customs and behavior? Can we really believe that they practiced polygyny, traced descent through the male line, lived in extended households, slept in hammocks, ate fish, or any other of a thousand details that these records transmit to us? Are we to throw everything out?



Woodcut from Hans Staden's book recounting cannibalism among the Tupinamba; Staden is on the right (with a fig leaf and hands folded in prayer).

Lindenbaum (1982) reaches a similar, inescapable conclusion that Arens would have us believe that, "because some ethnographic accounts of cannibalism are certainly fictitious, all reports of cannibal behavior belong to the field of mythology". The problem here is best represented by Arens' own confession that he may have "omitted someone's favorite cannibals" in his "selected cases" and this is most obvious in that he apparently missed, according to Abler (1980), the extensive "portrait of Iroquoian cannibalism" that has been "painted by numerous scholars in the past". Though both Abler and Arens had access to the same data, Arens was either ignorant of the data or chose to ignore it. Such anti-cannibalism myth-building, according to Abler, "is a normal process, the sort of activity engaged in by all politicians".

Nor does Arens seem to have a full understanding of what might make cannibalism a functional and useful practice. "You would think in terms of evolution", he has said, "that if people ate each other we wouldn't be around. It's not a good survival strategy, not a way for a species to proceed" (Roach 2003). Obviously Arens needs to do some homework on evolutionary theory and behavioral ecology. Cannibalism among non-human animals is extensive and well documented⁸ and has *not* resulted in inhibited natural selection or species extinction. Just the opposite, in fact: Cannibals can recoup their reproductive investment if conditions mean offspring are unlikely to survive. (Actually, cannibalism in this context can only evolve if the energy growth rate of juveniles is higher than their death rate without cannibalism.) Nor is starvation a particularly compelling force amongst cannibalistic species. And because cannibals are relatively invulnerable to injury and death during a predation attack (because they prey on the younger, smaller, and weaker), they actually strengthen their gene pool. It is an adaptation that, by increasing nutrient availability, eliminating a potential competitor, and reducing population growth (thus resulting in more food for others), promotes higher fitness in more-cannibalistic than less-cannibalistic species.

LIVING TO EAT OR EATING TO LIVE?

NUTRITIONAL MOTIVATIONS for cannibalism figure prominently in ethnohistoric accounts of the practice, perhaps the most elaborate interpretation of which can be found in the materialistic "food-based" cannibal theories of Marvin Harris's *Cannibals and Kings*. Some critics have taken Harris to task over this, misinterpreting his theories of cannibalism among the Aztecs as a means to address a "protein shortage", but Harris (1985) denies this was his intention. He asserts that the practice of warfare cannibalism was a normal by-product of pre-state warfare itself and that the question isn't what compelled the Aztecs to engage in cannibalistic activities, but what compelled them to *stop doing it*. Human flesh became bad to eat, he says, "for essentially the same reasons that the Brahmans stopped eating beef and Americans won't eat dogs: the cost and benefits changed".

Harris makes a similar association between cannibalistic practices and political organization in Oceania where, he observes, with the rise of centralized governments, prisoners of war became more valuable as "taxpayers" and peasants than

as meat for a meal. This appears to be borne out by the prevalence of cannibalism (or reports thereof) among peoples of New Guinea, northern Australia, and most of the islands of Melanesia (among others) who were organized on a band or village basis – in strict contrast to Fiji, "where armies of powerful paramount chiefs fought pitched battles with each other for hegemony over a dense population without yet achieving a semblance of centralized government". It is precisely on Fiji, Harris says, that "warfare cannibalism reached a pitch of ferocity unmatched in the rest of Oceania".

Berndt (1962) has reported that there have been repeated references to people being considered as food among easily a dozen tribes in Papua New Guinea alone, and it was not uncommon for dying people to instruct survivors to eat them. Diamond (1997) speculates that "protein starvation is probably ... the ultimate reason why cannibalism was widespread" in this area. Diamond (2005) also describes Mangareva's 18th century decline into "a nightmare of civil war and chronic hunger": People turned to cannibalism, "in the form not only of eating freshly dead people but also of digging up and eating buried corpses". McCoy (1979) reviewed the archaeological evidence for Easter Island cannibalism, concluding that "Food shortages are reflected in the emergence of cannibalism, to which there are numerous references in traditions on warfare" (cited in White 1992). The emaciated *moai kavakava* carvings on Easter Island, while generally interpreted to represent death, may also reflect the island's scarce resources (Seaver Kurze, 1997). However, Turner (1999) notes in the case of Southwestern cannibalism that starvation is an inadequate explanation for the practice "because of the near absence of examples in the Mogollon area, where winters would have been harsher than in other culture areas of the Southwest and where one might therefore expect many starvation emergencies to have occurred".

Devereux (1976) reports that, in times of famine, women of the *Ngali* people of Kenya and the *Yumu* people of Nigeria undergo abortions in order to feed the fetus to children already born. "The mother herself also partakes of the flesh of the fetus, because she is 'meat-hungry'". Female animals are known to eat the afterbirth and some human females eat the umbilical cords in order to become fertile. Meat taboos imposed on some female humans who have delivered a child may be culturally provided defenses against the mother's cannibalistic impulses (which, in contemporary society, express themselves in the form of pretending to devour the baby from sheer love because it "looks good enough to eat").

According to Tannahill (1976), during World War II, "large numbers of people had volunteered to aid casualties by becoming blood donors... "and the transfusion service's bank was soon overflowing. The advisers recommended that the surplus should be used to make black puddings or blood sausages for general distribution on ration". This was vetoed: "Consuming blood by vein was one thing, ingesting it by mouth quite another".

Still borrowing from the natural fitness model, Richard Klein in *The Dawn of Human Culture* speculates that cannibalism may be a specialized human tendency that humans inherited from their last shared ancestor.

One can of course take the materialistic or animal-human

analogue only so far, especially in that humans are the only species capable of worrying about whether its food is intra- or extra-specific (although many humans do not), but the underlying forces may not have to be all that different to result in similar behaviors. Most acts of cannibalism ascribed to humans involve people outside the "family group". As University of Richmond behavioral ecologist Peter Smallwood has observed, "humans have spent most of their evolutionary history in small family groups, and anything or anyone outside of the family group would be fair game" (personal communication). This is true of aggressive tendencies as well, which the history of humanity has shown to know virtually no limit. One can hardly show greater hatred toward an enemy than by eating him; cannibalism, in this context, may well be described as a logical culmination of a war complex. As Robert Carneiro has said in *The Anthropology of War* (1990), "Sooner or later in the escalation of outrages and indignities heaped by one side on the other, the final rung on the ladder is almost bound to be reached. And that rung is cannibalism". In *Native Cultures of the Pacific Islands* Oliver (1989a) reports that

...in many Island societies the man who made a practice of killing enemies on all possible occasions achieved a high level of prestige, usually accompanied by deference, including some based on fear, because on some occasions, such men were employed to kill not outsiders (i.e., "enemies") but neighbors.

Some researchers appear to be uncomfortable with these interpretations, however. As Barker (1998) says, the possibility that we could be (or could have been) cannibals exercises an uneasy pressure on our cultural psyche. Or as Abler (1980) says, "It is not that 17th century Iroquois were inhuman but rather they were like the rest of us, all too human in their treatment of other men". Bullock (1998), by contrast, wants us to believe that violence among the Anazazi shouldn't be seen as abnormal presumably because cannibalism *is* seen as abnormal; if he can refute the former, the latter would seem to follow. "Most of the physical evidence previously interpreted as directly resulting from cannibalistic activity", he says, "is now recognized as evidence of interpersonal violence". But this assertion is not borne out by evidence reported by Turner (1992): "We have found no examples in the forensic literature of such massive bone damage due to victim beating or child battering". Not that this proves cannibalism occurred, but the bone damage is so extensive that Bullock's anti-cannibalism interpretation is untenable. Similarly, Bullock attempted to dismiss Turner's appraisal of bone burning at various sites by suggesting the burned remains are indicative of cremation – but Turner reports that the burning of bone in these cases refers to small fragments of bones or areas of larger bones, but not whole individuals.

Bullock (1992) also seems to be particularly preoccupied with refuting the "man as animal" paradigm. Turner's and White's models, he says, "deny the important cultural differences that make humans unique among animals". In other words, as Bullock sees it, the paradigm fails in its inability to recognize culture as a necessary consideration in behaviors

such as cannibalism. But why are human and other animal behaviors, or interpersonal violence and cannibalism, mutually exclusive? Humans *are* animals and violent behavior, however much we may abhor it, is a part of the world we live in; whether it is normal or abnormal is a moral judgment. Subsequently, much of the discussion can be relegated to value relativism. Diamond (1997) again:

The horror of my New Guinea friends when I described circumcision, US treatment of the elderly, and US funeral customs matched Westerners' horror at cannibalism. There are good reasons why cannibalism might have been customary in some societies but abhorrent in others.

So we inevitably return to the Human Condition: Archaeologist Paul Bahn, in commenting on the idea of cannibalism occurring on Easter Island, toes the Arens party line, and this is a safe bet – but it may be too safe, as if Arens's arguments are unassailable. For example, in what appears to be a facetious remark, Bahn (1997) dismisses Katherine Routledge's story of "Ko Tori" (the last man on the Easter Island who is said have eaten human flesh) because, Bahn says, the man was reported to be toothless – implying "that he, at least, could not have left tooth marks on anyone". I imagine this is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but, all kidding aside, the fact that Ko Tori was toothless in old age (a not uncommon event, especially on an island where dental problems were known) doesn't mean he didn't have teeth when he was younger, especially since his alleged cannibalism occurred years before.

Ultimately, when supporters of Arens rally around his claim that he was unable to unearth any evidence for cannibalism as a *custom* in any society at any time, it's hard to swallow (no pun intended) – partly because much of Arens's argument hinges on the meaning of "custom". Since many accounts of cannibalism, whether legitimate or not, deal with individual events (from which some draw extended conclusions about its prevalence), the important question is not whether the practice is a matter of *custom* but whether the practice is *real*. As Jacobs (2003) has said, the degree to which cannibalism was practiced is debated, not the existence of the practice itself. Yet, presumably restricting themselves to the use of "custom" in this context, some folks believe cannibalism is extraordinarily rare and exceptional.

But how should one define a "custom" anyway? As a matter of public policy? A systematic program with rules and procedures and perhaps etiquette? If one group of people were to fight another and eat the vanquished, is that any more or less a custom than if a people succumbed to severe poverty and resorted to eating the dead for food? Or, indeed, killing the living in order to eat them? How widespread or systematic does a "custom" need to be to meet this criteria? The Uruguayan rugby players whose airplane crashed high in the Andes in 1972 survived because of cannibalism – and, indeed, a form of cannibalism that allocated specific responsibilities to specific persons (i.e., some were responsible for cutting meat, others for preparing it). And rules emerged as well: Those given the grisly task of dismembering corpses were entitled to their, *ahem*, "lion's share", and no one ate flesh from the body

of a relative. This sounds like the development of a custom to me, and this all occurred in a single, isolated event. Is it such a leap of imagination to envision this being a more widespread social phenomenon?

WE ARE WHAT WE EAT

IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE that, of all the social taboos, cannibalism and incest rank amongst the highest. Indeed, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro says in *From the Enemy's Point of View* (1992), "Cannibalism is like incest, impossible: impossible in the sense of making bodies and signs, persons and names, coincide. The very act of eating transforms what is eaten into something else: the symbol escapes from under the gesture". But while the incest taboo has a biological imperative associated with it; i.e., history, as well as population genetics (e.g., Keightley, et al., 2005), have shown the fallacy of people, often of a "royal" persuasion, trying to maintain a "pure" bloodline by inbreeding, only to result in physical mutation and mental retardation, it's still violated (and illegal in most modern societies). Easter Island appears to be no exception to this rule,⁹ and there is ample evidence of the practice elsewhere in Oceania where people of high rank were traditionally allowed many freedoms, including the freedom to violate incest taboos (because no one of lesser rank would dare express criticism). This is hardly news; royal brother-sister marriages were known to have occurred in ancient Egypt. Interestingly enough, the language of incest as it appears in Oceania parallels that of cannibalism. People who committed incest were said to have "consumed their own kind", hence the meaning of the Tahitian term *'amu toto* (meaning "to eat one's blood") (Huntsman, et al., 1976).

Our incest taboos appear to be part of a class of social devices that limit inbreeding, particularly among intelligent, slow-maturing animals that bear few offspring at a time and which live in family units (Aberle, 1963; Lindzey, 1967). As Wagner (1972) has noted, a taboo operates to regulate human action regardless of its cultural or biological origin. But by contrast, as discussed above, there's no significant evolutionary disadvantage to eating one's own kind, mostly only social prohibitions against it.¹⁰

It's not hard to believe that many reports over the centuries – from sailors, explorers, anthropologists, and others – have either misinterpreted what they saw or heard about, or even brought to their interpretations a certain cultural bias. Such is the Human Condition; the "us vs. them" mentality is a product of social and evolutionary processes and no doubt

influenced early reports as well as more recent studies. But to believe that all the reports, early or otherwise, are erroneous or the product of cultural bias (Bahn says "the accusation of cannibalism is essentially a term of abuse" but this does not have to be so¹¹) doesn't always make much sense. Especially when one considers the acts of cannibalism for which there is no dispute as to their occurrence. For example, the survival cannibalism of the Uruguayan rugby players (mentioned above); the doomed Franklin expedition searching for the Northwest Passage in 1845; the Donner Party trapped in the Sierra Nevadas in 1846; Colorado's Alfred¹² Packer (who in his 1864 actions and demeanor blended both survival and criminal cannibalism elements); or even the 1884 *Mignonette* disaster¹³ (in which two seamen were charged with killing a young shipmate in order to eat him, which they did, after their ship sank); the ritual, sacrifice-oriented practices of the

Aztecs¹⁴; or the sociopathic acts of cannibal serial killers like Joachim Kroll (Germany, 1950s, 60s, & 70s), Andrei Chikatilo (Soviet Union, 1970s & 80s), and Jeffrey Dahmer (U.S., 1990s). To say nothing of the observed phenomenon of the funerary cannibalism performed by the Yanomamö (a primitive tribe living in the South American Amazon basin) or the Foré (a tribe in New Guinea). Even "medical" cannibalism has been documented, as in the case of potions concocted from the pulverized bones of people buried in the West Kennett Long Barrow in England.¹⁵ There is some measure of irony in this, as David Salisbury (2001) has pointed out:



A 1557 woodcut depicting prisoners being disemboweled and their limbs grilled on a *boucan* or barbecue; from André Thevet's *Les Singularitez de la France Antarctique* (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris).

At the same time that Europeans were condemning various native peoples as cannibals ... they were practicing a form of cannibalism themselves. Use of medicines made from blood and other human body parts was widespread in Europe through the 17th century. Europeans of the period consumed fresh blood as a cure for epilepsy and substances from various body parts to treat a variety of diseases including arthritis, reproductive difficulties, sciatica, warts and skin blemishes. ... Pieces of mummified human flesh imported from Egypt were considered a general panacea and were widely prescribed by the physicians of the day.

Arens, who once dismissed eyewitness reports by American anthropologist Gertrude Dole of human osteophagy (consumption of bone material) among the Amahuaca Indians of southeastern Peru, eventually recanted his posi-

tion, saying "I now believe it was unreasonable to adopt this position" (Barker 1998). However, Arens went on to conveniently declare that osteophagy should not be defined as cannibalism "because Western societies and the groups in question don't refer to it that way" (Arens 1998). Nevertheless, anthropologists and other outsiders have observed the consumption of bone ashes among the Yanomamö (Chagnon 1992, 1997; Barker 1998) and do describe it as a form of ritual cannibalism. Steward & Faron (1959) relate that "The bodies of common people (in Venezuela and the Greater Antilles) were roasted so that the fat could be collected and drunk with beer when they were buried". In Honduras the Guyapé Indians drank the cremated ashes of the deceased in native beer (*chicha*) and that, while the Sae ordinarily ate the corpse of the deceased, a rich person drank the ashes with beer.

WE ARE "THE OTHERS"

IF WE WISH TO APPROACH the subject of cannibalism rationally, we have to avoid being squeamish just as must also avoid being arrogant (i.e., only the "heathens", "savages", "infidels", or the like would do such things while "we", by contrast, represent the alleged pinnacle of evolution in thought and action). Given the complexity of the natural and socially evolved world we live in, why does it have to be one or the other, all or nothing, us *versus* them, cannibalism *versus* non cannibalism? In a 1992 article, Bahn asked us to make a choice between imaging our ancestors as people with complex funerary rituals or as blood-thirsty cannibals. Why can't they be both?

While there seems to be little doubt that cannibalism has been attributed to "others"¹⁶ for the purpose of denigrating them (or justifying forced Christianization), not all peoples who have been allowed to so act see it as a bad thing. This is another crack in the foundation of Arens's argument (and those who adopt it); if some individuals or cultures don't view cannibalism as "evil", the argument that the practice is just a manifestation of cultural bias starts to disintegrate. William Thomson, of the U.S.S. *Mohican* expedition to Easter Island in 1886, reported that older islanders claimed to have eaten human flesh in their youth and even described the preparation and cooking. In like fashion, Juan Tepano, in *Legends of Easter Island*, reports that his mother told him men were killed in wars and that their bodies were cut into pieces and distributed among the people for food. Would they have readily admitted to this if there was always such shame associated with it?

Lindenbaum (1982) reports "hundreds of unabashed self-described reports of cannibalism" among the Foré. Refuting Arens's assertion that institutionalized cannibalism never existed because the people who are alleged to be cannibals almost always deny it, Barker (1998) states unequivocally that this is simply not true among the Wari, who freely admitted eating human flesh and described their practices in detail. Harris (1985) reports the same among Foré women, who openly told researchers that they had previously engaged in mortuary cannibalism. Barker goes on to note that

what lends most weight to the case for the reality of

Wari cannibalism is the testimony of Wari themselves.... Since the 1950s, scores of older Wari who remember life before the contact have talked about how they themselves participated in or witnessed cannibalism. Their accounts have been highly consistent, with individuals in different subgroups and different communities repeatedly describing the same events and similar practices.... If we cannot believe Wari when they say they used to eat human flesh, then we ought to dismiss everything else they have said about their lives before the contact.

These accounts were further corroborated by missionaries and government officials who witnessed cannibalism at Wari funerals in the 1950s and 1960s as well as by reports from two Brazilian scientists, Aparecida Vilaça (an ethnographer from the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro) and Denise Meireles (an anthropologist and ethnohistorian from the University of Brasilia) (Salisbury 2001).

Likewise, Sanday (1986) cites Cook regarding the Fijian admission of cannibal practices:

(T)hese (the men) of Feejee are formidable on account of the dexterity with which they use their bows and slings, but much more so on account of the savage practice to which they are addicted...of eating their enemies whom they kill in battle. We were surprised that this was not a misrepresentation. For we met several Feejee people at Tongataboo, and, on inquiry of them, they did not deny the charge.

Interestingly enough, according to Hogg (1966), the Tongans had an "instinctive reluctance...to indulge in the eating of human flesh until the Fiji Islands brought their powerful influence to bear on them". Hogg (1966) also relates that Herman Melville (of *Moby-Dick* fame) was captive in the Marquesas for several months during the mid-19th century.

He states that it was quite evident that the Marquesan tribesmen knew that cannibalism was severely frowned upon by white men, and would go to some lengths to conceal their practices, rather than come into open conflict with them. *But they had no intention of giving up those practices for all that.* (emphasis mine)

John W. Church reports in a 1919 issue of *National Geographic* that Marquesan "men were fierce, cruel cannibals, whose chief occupation...was the killing of both men and women of other tribes for gastronomic purposes". He describes ritual killings, the Marquesan fondness for "long pig" ("the longer the better"), and the fact that the last official recognition of cannibalism occurred many years previously, even though reports of the practice existed as recently as 1917. Bellwood (1979, 1987) as well as Oliver (1989b) make repeated references to cannibalism in Oceania – the former discussing "circumstantial evidence for cannibalism and human sacrifice" among those who gave rise to Pacific cultures

circa 15,000 BCE (with specific references to Melanesia and Polynesia); the latter asserting that cannibalism occurred but mostly for ritual and revenge purposes and only rarely for food.

Osborne (1997) relates the work of an anthropologist who reported on criminal charges of cannibalistic mass murder brought by Australian authorities in 1959 against sixteen Miyanmin people of western Papua. The Miyanmin, it was said, were “incredibly matter-of-fact” about their acts, which were meticulously documented. “It is not a missionary’s tall tale”, he says. Sagan (1993) reports that cannibalism among Polynesians is not only not unusual nor denied but that the cannibal actually takes pleasure in the human feast and strongly resisted efforts to abandon the practice. “Cannibalism”, Sagan goes on to say:

is not a deep, dark, repulsive ritual imposed on people by tyrannical priesthood. The cannibal does not claim that he dislikes the experience or that he does it only to obtain benefits such as fertility of the soil or a cure for disease. The eating of human flesh is, for him, a positive and pleasurable act.

Reports have also been authenticated of human sacrifice among primitive peoples without any mention of cannibalism. Loeb (1974) notes that “Australians and Papuans of New Guinea had no human sacrifice, while the Fijians and Polynesians were noted for it”. Moorehead (1966) relates Cook’s first-hand account of human sacrifice among the Tahitians.¹⁷ Yet if the motive is to relegate the cannibals into a category of degenerate man-eaters, why wouldn’t all cannibals also practice human sacrifice? That some people practiced human sacrifice and others didn’t would seem to at least accommodate the notion that some people probably practiced cannibalism and others didn’t. It may be just that simple.

Even in First World cultures there are often no direct laws against cannibalism. A recent case in Germany where two men met with the ostensible purposes that one would kill and eat the other (and did so) has wrought havoc with laws, or the lack thereof, in that country as to the best way to adjudicate the subject (*InfoBeat News* 2004).

Of course, some accounts are blatantly false but do not necessarily appear as such to the uninitiated. For example, Fischer (1992) describes an account published anonymously in the French journal *L’Univers* of Lieutenant-Commander Frédéric Ollivier of the *Jules-de-Blosseville*, who supposedly arrived on Easter Island in January of 1845. Ollivier, according to the story, was nearly eaten alive by the islanders but managed to escape. This visit does not feature in any of the documented lists. The report, Fisher goes on to say, claims the ship put in to “take on water” – which is absurd, because every sea master of the time knew Easter Island was always in need of water itself, not a source of it for others. Other details, including Ollivier’s alleged escape by jumping from a cliff into the sea (there’s no place on the island where one can actually do this and survive), and the sensationalism of the article, attest to not just its fictional nature but to the reprehensible intent to describe the Easter Islanders as savages who in their entire history never attacked except only after being attacked.

As with so many other aspects of science and society, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes and scientific proof is not altogether lacking. Most likely some early reports of cannibalism were misinterpreted, mistranslated, not witnessed, or deliberately fabricated. But more recently, thanks to the works of Christy Turner and Tim White, we have evidence that cannibalism occurred among the Anasazi of the Four Corners region in the southwest U.S. – the kind of evidence that Arens (1979) or Bullock (cited in Bower 1993) didn’t think existed or ever would: Human muscle protein (myoglobin) found in coprolite or fossilized human feces¹⁸ (as well as in a cooking vessel (Billman, 2000; Lambert, et al., 2000; Marlar 2000; Preston 1998; White 2001)). And because the chemical composition of myoglobin differs among different taxa, it’s possible to identify the type (species) of flesh consumed. The treatment of human bones, the presence of butchering tools, and the presence of myoglobin residue make it difficult to escape the conclusion that humans both processed and consumed human flesh.

If Turner and White (and others) turn out to be correct (and even Arens has said that cannibalism is “a good interpretation” of Turner’s bone assemblages (Bower 1993)), cannibalism related to conflict or warfare may turn out to have been more widespread than previously thought. Given the Pueblo Indian relationships between hunting and warfare, between killing humans and killing other animals, this isn’t too surprising. However, many Native American groups are upset by these allegations,¹⁹ some of whom it would seem have eagerly embraced the outmoded notion of the “noble savage” but ironically wish to apply it to themselves. Even a cursory look at the history of the Human Condition reveals hundreds of thousands of socially pathological, and in many cases “officially” sanctioned, killings and mutilations committed by humans against humans on every continent (except Antarctica). As Sagan (1993) has noted, “with pitifully few exceptions, almost all human societies have exercised some form of institutionalized aggression” and that “social aggression, in certain specific forms, has been sanctified and legitimated by the religion of every society”. Sagan actually concludes that cannibalism is a direct expression of human aggression. Is it so hard to imagine that cannibalism would become a part of such conduct, whether for “ritual” or nutritional benefit?

Even so, with these sensitive issues in perspective (or so I hope), we thus approach the idea of cannibalism on Easter Island with a certain, healthy caution...

EASTER ISLAND AND ENVIRONS: A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON CANNIBALISM

ONE OF THE FIRST EXPLORERS to mention cannibalism relative to Easter Island was Pierre Loti aboard the French ship *La Venus* in 1840. He said:

We must not forget that an instinct for cannibalism smoulders at the most intimate center of the Polynesian nature, so attractive and debonair; also that off there in Oceania, the Maoris in spite of their charming manners will sometimes still eat you.

He also went on to observe that:

Skulls, jawbones we find everywhere (on the island). It seems impossible to scratch the ground without stirring those human remains. The country seems an immense ossuary. This comes from an epoch of which the terror is still handed down by the old people; the starving and stifling on their island which they did not know how to leave; there followed among the tribes great waves of extermination and cannibalism.

Surely none of these early explorers actually *saw* any cannibalism on Easter Island and thus they were most likely extrapolating what was “known” about Polynesia at the time, correct or otherwise. But he may also have been relying on stories or legends related to him by islanders themselves. One of those legends involves the famous “battle” on the Poike Peninsula (a battle which we know today probably didn’t occur, or at least not the way the legend relates it). The story goes that seven sons in a single family were murdered by someone named Ko Ita who lived at Orongo. The motivation for the murder was cannibalism. Conflict in the guise of revenge escalated and spread to the Poike Peninsula where the epic battle between the so-called Long Ears and Short Ears took place.

Since we know the legend of this battle has little or no basis in fact, it’s not too difficult to question the veracity of other details, such as what presumably provoked the conflict in the first place. There are other variations on the battle and what provoked it, which cast their own shadows on the story’s legitimacy. And even if there had been a murder, there’s nothing to substantiate the notion that it was motivated by cannibalism. If anything, the cannibalism was probably used to justify denigration of another clan – as, indeed, today on the island the subject of cannibalism is embarrassing. So much so that “rat-eater” is used on a par with “cannibal” as an insult – deriving from a time when older islanders displayed a taste for the Polynesian rat.

The famous (infamous?) cave on the western edge of the island known as Ana Kai Tangata is frequently cited as substantiation for the legends of cannibalism on Easter Island. The reason for this is that one meaning of the name is “man eat cave”. In the vernacular of Rapanui, this could very well actually mean “cave where men eat” or “cave where men are eaten”. However, the word “kai” has both ancient and modern etymologies – meaning either “to tell” or “to eat”, respectively. So the name could actually mean “cave where men tell stories”. (Maybe even stories about cannibalism, but seriously....) There are even some who believe that Ana Kai Tangata got its name simply because the mouth of the cave looks like it’s swallowing people when they enter it. And Fischer (1992) speculates that the name might relate to “a legendary East Polynesian chief, Kai Tangata” – also known on Aotearoa (New Zealand), Hawai’i, and Rarotonga.

But legends are often a poor substitute for fact – a notion lost, it would seem, on many early explorers who readily embraced the accounts of Polynesian cannibalism regardless of how substantiated they were. Thomson (1889), for example,

said that “in all Polynesia there were no more confirmed cannibals than” the islanders of Rapa Nui”. “The practice”, he goes on to say:

is said to have originated with a band of natives who were defeated in war and besieged in their stronghold until reduced to the borders of starvation. From this time the loathsome custom of devouring prisoners, captured in war, grew in popular favor. Cannibalism may have originated in a spirit of revenge, but it grew beyond those limits and not only were prisoners of war and enemies slain in battle eaten, but every unfortunate against whom trivial charges were made met that fate. Instances are related in the legends of children being devoured by their parents not from any other motive than to satisfy the cravings of their depraved and vitiated appetites. Cannibalism was practiced until a comparatively recent period. Several of the older natives acknowledge that they had frequently eaten human flesh in their youth, and described the process of cooking and preparing “long pig” for the feast.

In more scientific (or at least relatively contemporary) terms, there does seem to be some evidence that cannibalism (or cannibalism-like activity) took place on the island. Early archaeologists and anthropologists were told that cannibalism did occur, and these were folks not expected to have brought to their observations any particular cultural bias, though they may quite simply have reported what they had been told. Frank (1906) related stories of a man named Pitou-Pitou who caused small vessels to be wrecked on the treacherous shoreline so that he could hand the half-drowned crews to cannibals for “culinary purposes”: “That human sacrifice was practiced is certain... the natives do not hide the fact and inform by tradition. The numberless skulls found at today at (Rano Raraku), however, do not necessarily tell a tale of cannibalism, for it was also a burial ground”. This is further borne out by comments Charles Love made in the 2003 documentary *Easter Island: Mystery & Magic* – namely that the bones of children 18 months to 3 years of age were excavated from Ahu Tautira, possibly interpreted to be the remains of sacrifices. In any case, Frank goes on to say that “Cannibalism is a practice of the past and only the very oldest men remember partaking of human flesh”...

Only the “Elders” were allowed to assist and came singly to the sacrifice-banquet, by different routes, at night. It was under the shadow of huge, massive, ferocious looking monoliths that the victims, always captives or shipwrecked sailors (often Peruvians) were eaten.

Things *generally* get better from here, however. Katherine Routledge (1917) said that “great cannibal feasts were held at Mataveru” and that the Birdman cult was “finally crushed by the secular exploiters of the island, whose house is built at Mataveru with the foundation stones of the cannibal

habitations". In her well known *Mystery of Easter Island* (1919), Routledge relates that the *moai* known as "Paro" (the largest ever moved to an *ahu*) was toppled following a conflict that ensued when a woman of the western clans was eaten by men of the eastern:

(H)er son managed to trap thirty of the enemy in a cave and consumed them in revenge; and during the...struggle this image was thrown down. The oldest man living when we were on the island said that he was an infant at the time; and another, a few years younger, stated that his father as a boy helped his grandfather in the fight.

Routledge is a font of information:

While legends record how many people were eaten after each fray, all living persons deny, with striking unanimity, not only that they themselves have ever been cannibals, but that their fathers were so. If this is correct, the custom was dying out for some reason before the advent of Christianity;²⁰ their grandfathers, the old people admit, ate human flesh, but, if there were any rites connected with it, they "did not tell". The great-grandmother of an old man of the Miru clan was, according to his account, killed on the high central part of the island by the Ureohei and eaten. In revenge for the outrage, one of her sons, Hotu by name, killed sixty of the Ureohei. Another son, who had pacifist leanings, thought the feud ought then to be ended, but Hotu desired yet more victims, and there was a violent quarrel between the two brothers, in which the peace-maker was struck on the head with a club; for, as Hotu remarked, if they had slain his father, it would have been different, but really to eat his mother was "no good".

Routledge relates that "Our acquaintance with the person said to have been 'the last cannibal', or rather with his remains, came about accidentally during the time when I was alone on the island" and tells the legend of Kainga killing and cooking Mahanga in order to eat him; Mahanga was *not* eaten, however; his body was wrapped and taken to an *ahu*. Santiago Pakarati relates this story in *Legends of Easter Island* (2002), which also features an account of cannibalistic revenge told by Mateo Veriveri: If the killer of a family member has eaten the body, the avenger must also eat the killer. "Afterward, the vengeance doesn't continue. The deed is finished since the assassin's victim is dead and so is the assassin".

Routledge reports the legend of Poié (which is also recounted by Luis Paté in *Legends of Easter Island*) after the vanquishing of the Hotu Iti: A compatriot, Vaha, was said to have delivered a thousand men for Poié's men to eat; "he took thousands of children by the leg and dashed them against the stone"; ... "Every day he did the same again, and brought a thousand men from Marotiri". "...one of the Long Ears", Routledge relates, "Ko Ita by name..."

who lived at Orongo, had in his house the bodies of

thirty boys, whom he had killed to eat. Among his victims were the seven sons of one man, Ko Pepi. Ko Pepi went mad, and ran round and round till he fell down, and his brothers took their mata'a and killed the Long Ears at Vinapu and at Orongo.

J. MacMillan Brown (1924) joins the discussion, repeating the story of cannibal feasts at Mataveri but says that the practice is food-based, not ritual. He refers to legends of cannibalism on Easter Island as well as accounts elsewhere in Polynesia, asserting that Easter Islanders were taught the custom by the Marquesans and Maori who, he says strangely enough, didn't practice this as a result of famine. He does report that islanders' robust physiques are due to consumption of human flesh, however, and concludes that cannibalism among New Zealanders and Marquesans was kept in check to some extent because of the abundance of dog and pig, neither of which appears to have lasted long on Easter Island (if the dog ever made it in the first place).

Brown relates the following island cannibalism story:

A *Tupahotu* woman with her daughter were travelling over from the south coast to Hangaroa and on the way they were both outraged and killed by one of a hostile clan. A *Tupahotu* man came across the dead bodies and recognized them. He carried the news through his clan; they rose and marched against the clan of the assassin, but when he had been slain, the battle ceased and the two clans cooked the dead and feasted on them. The reason for this state of affairs is that they never killed in peace for the sake of getting meat. But the legend of The Mother's Vengeance seems to point in the other direction. A canoe-carpenter was absent from his home, near Anakena, building canoes, when a friend called at his house and asked for a meal; his wife said she was all alone (her little boy was away on the beach) and could not accede to his request; he threatened her with death, and, as a last defence, she declared that her child when he grew up would cause his death by a wound on the right thumb. He slew her, cooked part of her and took away the rest to supply his household. When the body was all eaten he remembered the threat of the woman before he killed her and resolved to add the boy to his larder and make the threat impossible. But the ghost of the mother always appeared at the right moment and prevented him fulfilling his purpose.

The "cannibal assassin" eventually became so afraid of the ghost that he hid himself in a cave – but, when called out by his friends (who eventually brought the boy to the cave in an effort to resolve the problem), he attacked the boy, who bit him on the thumb and, thus distracted, was dispatched by the boy who struck the cannibal assassin with a rock. Brown states that this story seems to indicate cannibalism was not confined to times of war.

On the other hand, the 19th-century Catholic priest Hippolyte Roussel (cited in Métraux's *Ethnology of Easter Island*

(1940) says that cannibalism was *not* abandoned on the island before the introduction of Christianity and that it was always associated with warfare, in keeping with other reports on similar Polynesian behavior. Métraux, in his 1957 *Easter Island: A Stone Age Civilization of the Pacific*, also relates something that islander Victoria Rapahango told him – namely that, in her youth, she had known the last cannibals on the island. “They were the terror of little children”, he says. “Every Easter Islander knows that his ancestors were *kai-tangata*, ‘man-eaters’. Some made jokes about it, others take offence at any illusion to this custom which has become in their eyes barbarous and shameful”. Most importantly, Métraux also reports that “No native on the island denied that his ancestors were cannibals”, which again flies in the face of assertions made by Arens about the “otherness” of cannibal accusations. Like Brown before him, Métraux notes that cannibalism on the island was “not exclusively a religious rite or the expression of an urge for revenge; it was also induced by a simple liking for human flesh” and that women and children were the principal victims.

It’s not easy to reconcile the various motivations here, for Métraux also says that “Reprisals that followed such crimes were all the more violent because an act of cannibalism committed against the member of a family was a terrible insult to the whole family”. So, obviously, if cannibalism occurred, it was the result of numerous motivational factors: “The long war between the Tuu and Hotu-iti districts was indirectly caused by two men who craved human flesh”, Métraux reports. And he also goes on to say:

Direct evidence that the corpses of the victims (of ritual sacrifice) were eaten is given by Zumbohm and Geiseler who writes as follows: “The oldest people remember, and still recall, that war prisoners were eaten. When many of them were caught they were shut into huts built for the purpose in front of the stone idols and they were kept in them and fed until the time of festivities of the victory feast. On occasion of such ceremonies the prisoners were killed in honor of the gods and eaten”.

Like Métraux before him, Wolff (1948) contradicts Brown by saying “Women and children were killed, their flesh was eaten; thereby the life force (*mana*) of the enemy was absorbed”. Citing Thomson, Wolff relates how the Easter Island maxim “a man who sleeps late in morning cannot expect to see the sun rise” came into being ... with regard to a cannibal story about a chief named Oho-Taka-Tore who discovered during an absence that bodies that would be allocated for his consumption, and that of his men, had been re-allocated.

In a manner that would make Arens proud, Heyerdahl (1958) questions how it would be possible for cannibals to have been the “masters who wrought the classical giant sculptures of aristocratic ruler-types which dominated the countryside on this same island?” Apparently one can be a cannibal or a monument-builder, but not both.

Mumey (1963) resurrects the effect of Christianity on Easter Islanders when she says:

The Christianization of the Islanders brought about many changes in their way of living and in their relation to each other. Up to this time they were very little in the way of clothing, and cannibalism was rampant. Captives taken in battle were slain and eaten at great feasts. Fighting ceased, cannibalism became a thing of the past, and they began to live in an atmosphere of respectability.

Englert (1970) relates two accounts of cannibalism on Easter Island:

The Hanau Eepe, who lived principally in the area of Poike, had mixed to some extent with other groups, and some individuals or families resided in other parts of the island. One of them, called Ko Ita, made his home in Orongo on the lip of the crater of Rano Kau. According to the story, it became known that he had secreted in his house the corpses of thirty Hanau Momoko children which he had killed in order to eat them” (:130-131).

and

During (the) war between the people of Poie and Kainga, it is said, cannibalism was first practiced on a grand scale. Though this cannibalism undoubtedly had its ritual aspects and served as an insult to the vanquished, many of the traditions suggest that human meat was highly prized as a delicacy among these people who had available so little mammalian flesh. It seems likely that the development of the custom was related, at least in part, to food shortage”.

In *Legends of Easter Island* (2002) Santiago Pakarati relates the story of the cannibals Makita and Roke Aua, who visit Kainga and claim they prefer men’s “innards” to those of a chicken. Kainga subsequently kills, cooks, and serves Maanga (Mahanga) to the two (though Roke Aua is asleep while all this is happening). When Roke Aua awakens and asks about the food, Makita tells him it is human, after which the two leave. Their refusal of the food and subsequent departure insults Kainga who eventually tracks the two down and kills Makita. Roke Aua is allowed to live because he slept through the key moments.

Luis Paté, again cited in *Legends of Easter Island* (2002), tells the story of “Uru a Rei’s Leg”: Uru a Rei was said to have the power to curse men to death and was eventually killed by his enemies who cooked his body and distributed the food to those who had been terrorized by Uru a Rei.

While Mann (1976) relates the same tales of cannibalism described by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans, she claims that, in the year following Eyraud’s return to the island, “some Peruvian sailors visited Easter, and never left. They were eaten”. There is no evidence to support this assertion. Mann does relate the legend of the villain Oroí (whom Hotu Matu’a was said to have killed) whose body was placed in an *umu* to be baked before it was eaten; it was *not* eaten

because the flesh would not burn and Oroï was instead buried at an *ahu*.

Georgia Lee, citing a 1927 work in her *Rock Art of Easter Island* (1992), reports that “a victor in the hand-to-hand combat would assume the slain enemy’s name” and that, to absorb all the *mana* (or sacred power), “he ate some of his victim’s flesh...”. This is, of course, a kind of ritual cannibalism. Lee also mentions the emergence of cannibalism during the island’s Decadent Phase (AD 1500-1722) as the “old, ordered way of life gradually vanished” (1990).

Lee goes on to cite Patrick Kirch’s *Evolution of Polynesian Chiefdoms* in which evidence for cannibalism is supported by the proliferation of obsidian spear points (“*mata’a*” on Easter Island) – a phenomenon also noted by Peter Baker (1993), dating from times of conflict – as well as cut marks found on human bones characteristic of how people remove flesh from animal bones. The literature on cannibalism is rife with locations and descriptions of this.²¹ Anton (1998), for example, notes that human and nonhuman bone on Mangaia, Cook Islands, exhibits similar patterns of modification, suggesting cannibalism as a product of resource stress. The presence of cut marks on bones is not proof of cannibalism but, since these cut marks so often resemble those on other animal bones and because the human bones are often disposed of in ways similar to the handling of other animal bones, the correlation between the two isn’t hard to recognize.

An alternative explanation, of course, is that when human and other animal bones appear to have been treated similarly, one is due to secondary burial practices (ethnological evidence indicates that the dead on Easter Island were left to decompose, with their bones buried separately), the other due to food processing. Discussing the Krapina Neanderthal site in Croatia Russell (1987a) asserts precisely this. And it may be true. Of course, as paleontologist Peter Robinson has said, we are actually quite adept at telling the difference between secondary burial and cannibalism traces (Osborne 1997), so perhaps there shouldn’t be as much controversy over this as there is. Moreover, while Russell’s approach to alternative (i.e., non-cannibalism) hypotheses²² is appropriate, her conclusion that the bone breakage attributable to cannibalism is “unsupported” would be more convincing if the 77% of specimens at the site also fell into this category; i.e., she states that only 23% of the material contradicts claims of cannibalism. Suggs’s (1960) observation of a conspicuous lack of “grave furniture” in some Marquesan burials compared to others may have some bearing on

the cannibalism/secondary burial question. Nickens (1975) makes a similar observation about human remains discovered in Mancos Canyon, Colorado:

The conspicuous absence of certain bones provides one argument against a reburial explanation for the remains. Exhumed primary burials, subsequently reinterred, would undoubtedly retain elements of all the skeletal parts, at least in some proportion.



A 1593 Frankfurt engraving showing bowels and the head of a cannibal victim being boiled in a cauldron; Hans Staden is the bearded figure in the upper right corner; from Théodore de Bry’s *Dritte Buch Americae*.

Animals are treated ritually, like humans – but, if the social argument posits that people are too “sophisticated” for cannibalism, why would they not more dramatically and universally differentiate between themselves and other animals in the treatment of remains? Bullock (1998) says, “If one accepts the premise that humans are simply animals, then the analysis of human remains as faunal remains appears logical”. Why simply? It’s as if Bullock is desperate to believe humans are so much more superior to other animals

and that cannibalism is therefore not possible. Seems like he’s bringing a lot of baggage to the discussion. As Steward & Faron (1959) report, the Tupinambá employed hunting and feasting rites for both humans and jaguars, a not uncommon practice among tropical-forest peoples. Human burials in Fiji provide direct evidence regarding mortuary practices but they differ fundamentally from those of midden remains. As Steadman, et al. (2000) reports, disarticulated, fragmentary, and burned (but not cremated) human remains not consistent with burial customs have been described ethnohistorically or seen in prehistoric burial caves. They go on to conclude that, of more than two score persons “of all age classes cooked in what seems to be one event or two closely timed events were eaten is suggested by the remains of other animal foods (fish, rats, birds) in the identical midden context. It’s possible, of course, that fish, bird, rat, turtle, pig, and human remains were not consumed but were butchered, cooked, and discarded without being eaten – but every line of evidence that supports the inference that non-human taxa were consumed also supports the inference that humans were consumed.

As Paul Bahn noted in *Written in Bones* (2003), the ritual killing of some 70 young men at Huaca de la Luna, north coast of Peru between 1,300 and 1,500 years ago, shows “some evidence that cannibalism may have been practiced in some cases”. He goes on to say:

One set of bones...did show evidence of dismemberment. A group of skeletal remains of six or seven young men was found in a plaza adjacent to the one where most of the human remains were located. This group of bones, in addition to showing many of the same characteristics as the rest of the bones, showed evidence of cut marks consistent with cutting through muscle not only to dismember but also to deflesh the bone. The pattern of the cut marks is not very different from that seen on the bones of animals butchered for eating. This suggests the possibility that the people in this group were subject to ritual cannibalism.

Numerous sites with human remains reveal more than defleshing and therefore limit the viability of the secondary burial practice theory (especially since many of these sites show evidence of bone treatment without secondary burial): burn traces, pot polish,²³ percussion damage, disarticulations, and breakages – not all of which can be attributed to carnivorous, non-human animals. Although some North American societies are known to have removed flesh from the bones of the dead as part of the death ritual, they did not bash up the remains of their dead either before or after doing so (e.g., some skulls show considerable facial destruction and violence in general, which does not support the notion of survival cannibalism). Turner, who in 30 years has examined 15,000 skeletons and developed a rigid criteria²⁴ upon which to interpret findings suggesting cannibalism, says, “There is no known mortuary practice in the Southwest where the body is dismembered, the head is roasted and dumped into a pit unceremoniously, and other pieces get left over the floor”.²⁵ He goes on to say that:

The Southwestern human charnel deposits have their strongest perimortem taphonomic correspondences with the bones of large and small game animals that were butchered and cooked, and with skeletal assemblages in Mesoamerica where cannibalism was linked to ceremonies of human sacrifice.

It's therefore difficult to attribute these events, including those involving deposition of human feces containing human muscle protein, as merely rare, isolated, pathological acts – precisely because they aren't necessarily rare or isolated. As Ferdon, of Easter Island fame (cited in Turner, 1999) speculates, this may be due to cannibalistic behavioral traits transmitted from Mexico to the Southwest as an element of intimidation and social control. Still, however much we might want to interpret this in a negative light and therefore as an aberration, it's difficult not to see these as a function of custom.

In *The Evolution of Polynesian Chiefdoms*, Kirch describes archaeological evidence for the consumption of human flesh in the Marquesas which he calls irrefutable: scattered, broken, and often charred human bones in the upper levels of the Hane Dune Site faunal sequence. He cites Suggs (1960) who reports the “remains of a young child who had been cooked and partially eaten” in one of the Uea Valley rock

shelters, and goes on to note that ethnographic information on cannibalism from Handy (1923) indicates that the victims (called *ika*, “fish”, as in Fiji²⁶) were enemies from warring tribes. Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin (2001) describe symbolic use of fishhooks in Hawai'i and note that, “When erecting a war temple, the human sacrificial victim was dragged to the temple with a large fishhook in his mouth, just like a fish. Similarly, a Marquesan legend tells us that the tribal war god lowered a hook from heaven to catch a human victim on it”. Bellwood (1987) also discusses ethnographic records in which “fish” is used to describe ritual victims (usually enemies from warring tribes). He concludes that “the institutionalization of cannibalism in late pre-historic Marquesan society must be taken as a symptom of tensions which had developed between social groups, exacerbated by dense populations and recurrent famines” Revenge, rather than malnutrition, was the principal motive. In addition to discussing cannibalism on Easter Island specifically, he responds to skepticism about cannibalism generally:

While some anthropologists are skeptical that cannibalism actually existed anywhere in the world, and the ethnographic or archaeological evidence for ritualized consumption of human flesh has often been discounted, the case for cannibalism in late Fijian prehistory seems particularly sound. Gifford (1951) observed in his usual terse fashion that “man was the most popular of the vertebrate animals used for food”, based on the faunal materials from the Navatu and Vunda sites. Recent reanalysis of Gifford's Navatu collections using modern criteria for evaluating cannibalistic practices confirms his view. Rechtman carried out faunal and taphonomic studies of the human materials from Wakaya Island and is equally convinced that the archaeological evidence supports cannibalism as a major practice in later Fijian prehistory. Likewise, in his Lakeba Island sites, Best (1984) found that bones of *Homo sapiens* could be interpreted as “food remains”, based on frequent charring, cut marks, and “the under representation of hands, feet, and heads”. Of course, the contact-period historical sources speak to the ritualized and extensive nature of Fijian anthropophagy, which until recent years has not been questioned.

In *Island Populations of the Pacific*, McArthur (1968) describes circumstantial evidence for greater cannibalistic depredations amongst the child population than in any other sector and that, citing Caillot,²⁷ the population on Rapa during the eighteenth century “was so large that the people built their houses on high ground so that all of the land in the valleys could be used for growing *taro*”:

Guards were mounted all day over the valleys to prevent thefts of food by the people of neighboring valleys, and wars between the districts – usually consisting of only two or three villages at the head of a valley and its outlet to the sea – were both fre-

quent and ruthless. Cannibalism was practiced "dans toute son horreur" ("in all its horror") and only the first three children born in a family were allowed to live".

Oliver (1989a) renews the challenge that most of the European reports of cannibalism were received from members of non-cannibalistic societies intent on slandering their enemies. He asserts that, in most documented cases of South Seas cannibalism, it was not a source of food:

In some cases it was employed as punishment (i.e., eating a part of an enemy was a supreme gesture of retribution and contempt); in others it served as a magical means of absorbing some of the victim's desirable attributes, such as his strength, special skills, or spiritual essence. There were, however, a few cases in which man-eating was engaged in for the purpose of enjoying a highly valued kind of food. Instances of this were exiguous but fairly widespread, the most numerous of them having occurred in Fiji, where chiefly despots kept their ovens hot for the bodies of human "long-pigs".

But getting back to Easter Island proper, Sebastián Englert, who lived on Easter Island for 34 years, reports in his *Island at the Center of the World* (1970) that though ritual cannibalism may have been present earlier, the practice increased greatly for more "secular food cannibalism".

Drake (1992) re-iterates the accounts of Mataverí as a major center for cannibal feasts, "particularly before and after the major ceremonies at Orongo", and provides further clarification of the name Ana Kai Tangata – stating that it may mean high-status persons, including priests, could not eat with "commoners".

Fischer's *Easter Island Studies* (1993) relates that:

Mulloy wondered if, after the Battle of the Poike Ditch, cannibalism may have become a more practical activity and people were hunted for food and said Routledge's informants denied that their grandparents were cannibals, "probably because they had been exposed to missionary principles.

Amongst the most distinctive scientific analyses supporting cannibalism on the island comes from Arne Skjølsvold's *Archaeological Investigations at Anakena, Easter Island* (1994). In it he relates how, in a trench dug during excavations at Ahu Nau Nau, fire-damaged bones "found together with remains of edible prey indicates cannibalistic activity". He also says that, "some unburnt human bones were found mixed with other bones, which might indicate cannibalism". He goes on to conclude that cannibalistic activity did take place at Ahu Nau Nau, possibly as early as the 14th century. Interpreting 19th century comments from Geiseler (Ayres, 1995), Skjølsvold also concludes that "cannibalism had connections with the activities of the *ahu*".

Van Tilburg (1994) says that "Cannibalism

(anthropophagy) is a charge frequently leveled at Pacific islanders and partially substantiated to varying degrees in Fiji, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Cannibalism is mentioned in Rapa Nui ethnographies and at least one European account exists, but those tales may be exaggerated as in the case of warfare". She says that the "archaeological evidence for cannibalism is present on a few sites" but doesn't say what those sites are (though she does say the research is preliminary and conclusions shouldn't be drawn too hastily). She also discusses the use of the word *ika* (meaning "fish") as applied to sacrificial victims, whether eaten or not, and clarifies the use of the terms "exocannibalism" and "endocannibalism".

Orliac (1995) repeats the story of cannibalism at Mataverí but adds that "Cannibal meals were reserved for military chiefs and their warriors. Protein intake was therefore rare".

Geiseler's Easter Island Report (Ayres, 1995) states that "Cannibalism was practiced a long time ago but now is extinct. The oldest people still remember it and know that prisoners of war used to be devoured" after they were held captive until festivals or victory celebrations could be held. This, of course, reinforces the association between warfare and cannibalism: "Slain warriors of high rank who fell into the hands of the enemy during the war were disgraced through the burning of their skulls as if to burn their souls and thus expose them to the worst condition of which the natives could conceive". Geiseler also says that, "They did not kill captured women or girls, instead they were given away to some unwed warrior; once again this practice may be attributed to the shortage of available women".

In the *Easter Island Bulletins of William Mulloy* (1997), we learn that "A frequent theme of the legends of the (Decadent Period) relates the suffering of fugitives who hid in caves from human predators. The most horrible of atrocities are described".

Fischer's *History of the Pacific Islands* (2002) reports that "Varying degrees of cannibalism were common throughout most of a prehistoric and early historic Polynesia". He goes on to say:

Captured enemies were often ritualistically cooked and eaten, their flesh passed out to the entire community. Ritualistic cannibalism was practised in most of prehistoric Polynesia. It was infrequent, highly charged with *mana* or sociospiritual power... and almost invariably repugnant to its participants, frequently requiring them, before ingesting, to imbibe a mild narcotic such as kava to endure the ritual. Here cannibalism was a formal display of group superiority, governed by ancient Polynesia's strictest *tapu*. However, several variations of cannibalism existed throughout prehistoric Pacific Islands, and persists in New Guinea even today. Among the Hua people, for example, sons eat the corpses of their fathers and daughters eat those of their mothers as it is believed that this allows the deceased *nu*, or vital essence, to be transferred to the next generation.

John Flenley and Paul Bahn, in their recent *Enigmas of*

Easter Island (2002) observe with refreshing open-mindedness that, “given the unique cultural developments in this isolated place turned in on itself, as well as the strife and undoubtedly serious shortages of food it experienced in late prehistory, the existence of cannibalism (on Easter Island) cannot be totally discounted”.

Ann Altman’s recent translations of early visitors’ accounts (*Early Visitors to Easter Island*, 2004) reveals Rousset asking the stunning but unsubstantiated question: “Who knows how many foreigners have been eaten?” (The answer, at least as far as can be determined, is no one knows.)

Finally, a paper by Acuña, et al., presented at the VI International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific in September 2004, takes an interesting approach to the subject of cannibalism on Easter Island. First, the authors do not deny that cannibalism may have taken place but attribute it as much to symbolic practices as to hunger. They specifically refute Arens’ argument (as cited by Bahn and others), that “otherness” was a motivation for ascribing cannibal traits to islanders. While conflict certainly existed among clans, they assert, it was not predicated on moral superiority of one over another. Indeed, the authors assert that stories of cannibalism on Easter Island should not be dismissed but cleansed of ideological slants. They refer to a vision of the world in which nature is not separated from humanity – both share the same universe and common origins – and this is why plants, animals, and even people can be seen as potential food sources in a greater social context.

Reducing humans to a commodity may sound abhorrent because philosophically most people believe humans are an end unto themselves – but it’s interesting to note that we often use the term “cannibalize” not so much to refer to consumption of another human being but to describe the disassembly and re-use of parts from inanimate objects. Parallels on Easter Island to the use of human bones to make fish-hooks (Métraux, (1957) citing Thomson (1891) and Brown (1924); José Miguel Ramírez (personal communication 2004) is striking and not without analogs elsewhere in the world (e.g., awls, barbed points, daggers, and other artifacts made from human long bones as discovered in Mesoamerica (Turner, 1999). One might even say earlier *moai* fragments were cannibalized in construction of *ahu* – as evidenced by the *moai* head incorporated into the sea wall at Ahu Nau Nau and Ahu Mai Taki te Moa.

Ramírez (personal communication, 2004) relates interesting but inconclusive osteological evidence on Easter Island: “classic cuts on the surfaces” of bones “closer to the

extremes could indicate cutting meat instead (to separate long muscles)”. He describes burnt human bones in a “cooking context” and he examined the skull of a 6- or 8-year-old child with “clear marks around the *foramen magnum*”, though he couldn’t say those marks “indicates taking the brain to be eaten”. In evaluating human remains found at Ahu’O Rongo in 2001, Polet (2003) reports cut marks on the ulna of a 10-year-old. “These cut marks”, Polet says, “suggest that the corpse was defleshed with a sharp object prior to cremation and interment. They might result from a ritual treatment of the deceased before transfer from the original burial location to the *ahu*. On the other hand, they

could also point to cannibalistic or sacrificial practices”.

Clearly there’s additional information out there that needs to be further evaluated.

A QUESTION OF PROBABILITIES

WHILE THERE’S NO SHORTAGE of stories, and a relative absence of hard-core fact, we do know that Easter Island’s resources were depleted, evidently by explosive population

growth, resulting in food shortage and internecine conflict. It does not require a quantum leap at all to hypothesize that cannibalism occurred if for no other reason than the need for food. This is, alas, what humans do either out of aggression or desperation or both. At this point we could say we don’t know whether cannibalism ever occurred on Easter Island because it’s not archaeologically or anthropologically evident or what evidence we have is ambiguous – but, as I said above, this is a cop-out. In the absence of absolute, definitive proof, all we may be left with is probabilities but which probability is more likely to be borne out by what we know about human beings?

The problem in some people accepting whether cannibalism has occurred is they bring to the discussion an emotional response, a literal disgust at the idea, perhaps to neutralize collective guilt for the behavior of one’s own society or as a desire to not stigmatize other societies. But neither of these motives does much to enhance objectivity. And scientific discussions are not the place for moral judgments. As David Roberts has said, “even so grisly a rite as eating one’s enemies...could be weighed only in terms of how it worked within the” cosmos of the people engaging in such a practice in the first place. Why is that so difficult for people to accept? If there is nothing to be revolted about, perhaps the existence of cannibalism can be seen for what it is – another behavior in the myriad behaviors of the human being.

Cannibalism, or at least the idea of cannibalism, has been with us a long time, probably as long as there have been



Tahitian Sacrifice; from Cook’s voyages, as featured in Moorehead’s *Fatal Impact*

living creatures that, in the words of Mr. Spock, feed on death. Homer wrote about the cannibal cyclops Polyphemus in *The Odyssey* (800 BCE); in 450 BCE the Greek historian Herodotus described the Anthropophagi (Greek for “man-eaters”), an ancient nation north of Scythia; the Old Testament’s Jeremiah (19:9) says “And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons, and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend, in the siege and straitness where-with their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them”; there’s an 11th century illuminated manuscript at the British Library in London showing a “Cannibal Giant”; the 19th century Spanish painter Francisco Goya depicted the mythological cannibalistic behavior of Saturn devouring one of his sons in a mural from his home, “Quinta del Sordo” (House of the Deaf Man) – an allegorical allusion to time destroying all things. The Brothers Grimm presaged the devouring ovens of Nazi death camps with their cannibalistic witch in “Hansel & Gretel”²⁸, just as the giant’s words in the 19th century fairy tale “Jack & the Beanstalk” have become immortal for their gustatory imagery as well as that horrifying alliteration:

Fee fi fo fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman,
Be he alive, or be he dead,
I’ll have his bones to grind my bread.

And need I even mention “Hannibal the Cannibal” to provoke recollections of Thomas Harris’s inspired novel *Silence of the Lambs* (made into an equally inspired film by Jonathan Demme)?

Knowing what we do about the world we live in and the creatures who inhabit it, if I had to vouchsafe a guess in one direction or another, it would be to say this: Whether we ever uncover evidence of cannibalism as a practice sufficient to persuade its critics is irrelevant because cannibalism, in whatever form it takes, is likely to be with us for a long time to come.

FOOTNOTES

¹ A term from the Arawak *caniba*, an apparent corruption of *cariba* (meaning “bold”) – the name the Caribbean Indians of the Lesser Antilles gave to themselves. It was here that Columbus first heard and reported the term.

² The order of prevalence of reports of cannibalism, according to Sanday (1986).

³ In which the bread and wine of Holy Communion are transformed into the body and blood of Christ (Askensay 1994; Hardon 1985; Sagan 1993).

⁴ Given the accounts of cannibalism among the New Guinea tribes, it is ironic that, in early 1945, Japanese troops garrisoned in Arapesh villages of New Guinea engaged in cannibalism for food after allied forces cut off their supply lines; “the evidence that they committed cannibalism”, says Brown, et al. (1983), “consists of reliable eyewitness accounts given...in the field and later confirmed by officers’ battle diaries housed in the Australian war archives”.

⁵ A three-volume encyclopedia of twelve books produced over a span of five years starting in 1575.

⁶ “Cannibals, Tricksters, and Witches: Anthropophagic Images

Among Bimin-Kuskusmin” in *The Ethnography of Cannibalism* (Paula Brown & Donald Tuzin, eds.) - Society for Psychological Anthropology, 1983.

⁷ Reuben G. Thwaites (Burrows Brothers, 1898).

⁸ Intra-specific predation has been recorded in at least 1300 species, including 75 species of mammals, 21 species of rodents, and 15 primate species. The list includes protozoa, planaria, snails, centipedes, insects (like mites or the praying mantis), insects, fish (e.g., sticklebacks), eukaryotes, gastropods, invertebrates (e.g., spiders, beetles, scorpions, bees), amphibians (salamanders), birds (Easter Island’s Sooty Tern is known to practice hetero-cannibalism), rodents (prairie dogs, squirrels), mammals, and primates (monkeys, baboons, gorillas). Sand sharks engage in intra-uterine cannibalism, with the fastest-growing shark embryo, as soon as it breaks through its egg-cover, eating the remaining embryos one after the other (Askensay, 1994). There’s even a theory that a form of cannibalism exists in plants (gymnosperms, like cycads) by converting aborted ovules and seeds back into food.

⁹ With an initial population base of perhaps 200 persons, some kind of in-breeding was inevitable, especially among the royal clan. According to island legends, in order to preserve blood purity, members of the Urumanu clan were not allowed to marry members of the Miru clan (and vice versa). This may have contributed to a statistically high percentage of Easter Islanders with six toes on each foot – and a peculiar degeneration in the knee joint. According to Butinov (1990), the Miru clan were imputed to have weak legs and were even nick-named *ngapau*, meaning “bow-legged”). There is osteological evidence of in-breeding (at Anakena, the legendary landing site of Hotu Matu’a and the home of the royal Miru clan). Today there are very strict incest laws on the island – and even a phrase for the *tapu*: “Eating your own blood”.

¹⁰ There has been some discussion over the years about the possibility that neurological disorders associated with eating brain tissue may have emerged to evolutionarily discourage cannibalism, but the jury is still out on this, just as it’s still out on the question of whether eating one’s own kind engenders the risk of exposure to parasites. Even taking *kuru* into account (SEE APPENDIX), one has a much greater risk of falling ill as a result of eating, say, improperly-prepared meat than ever eating human flesh. Mozart, for example, is now believed to have died from trichinosis as a result of eating undercooked pork (Associated Press article, 2001).

¹¹ Once upon a time the Neanderthals were believed to have been lumbering, slow-witted savages for which cannibalism as a practice was easy to assign because they were thought to lack “sophistication”. But having come to understand that they were probably far more intelligent and perhaps even emotionally or socially sophisticated (e.g., Culotta 1999) does not mean cannibalism as individual or collective acts would therefore be outside their repertoire of behaviors. Indeed, the interpretation can swing both ways: Perhaps, as Lewis (2001) has suggested, we should also question whether the flowers discovered in the 60,000-year-old Shanindar cave in northern Iraq (first discovered in 1952) could have been blown in by the wind or carried in by rodents building a nest rather than placed there lovingly as a funeral rite. Similarly, a Neanderthal “grave” found at Chapelle aux Saints in France in 1908 could have been formed by sediment falling on the cave floor around the body and producing the appearance of a purpose-built burial place; goat horns found in a child’s grave in Uzbekistan may simply be digging tools rather than offerings from ancient times.

¹² The name is frequently spelled “Alferd” in the literature – but the traditional spelling would seem to be the more accurate and appropriate. Apparently, after joining the army during the Civil

War, Packer had his name tattooed on his arm, only the artist misspelled his name. It is said that Packer liked the variant so much he used it as a nickname. His tombstone, however, tells the final story. It says "Alfred Packer".

- ¹³ This case, which provoked a "defense of necessity" on the part of the accused, challenged the Maritime Department of the Board of Trade to avoid prosecution, as this was not a subject thought best for legal jurisprudence or public disclosure. In *Cannibalism and the Common Law*, author A.W. Brian Simpson notes that "maritime survival cannibalism, preceded by the drawing of lots and killing, was a socially accepted practice among seamen until the end of the days of sail; it is therefore not an exception but a counter-example".
- ¹⁴ On the subject of credibility of stories involving the Aztec, Turner (1999) notes: "Although some scholars maintain reservations about the reliability of early accounts of Aztec and Mesoamerican life, the consensus view grants the chronicles a core of accuracy despite European ethnocentrism and exaggeration". Harris (1985) also observes that, "If the Aztecs ate everything from deer to water beetle eggs and green lake scum (for which there is no doubt), why should anyone be surprised that they also ate people?".
- ¹⁵ In fact, cannibalism is divided into two main categories – endocannibalism (eating members of the family or group) and exocannibalism (eating "outsiders") and within each category are sub-categories (like medical, ritual, survival, criminal, and gastronomic; White (1992) includes even more: magical, funerary, judicial, institutional, symbolic, customary, and gourmet.
- ¹⁶ Métraux (1950), for example, takes the Spanish and Portuguese to task because they accused the South American Indians of cannibalism "on the vaguest evidence, often with the deliberate intent of justifying their enslavement".
- ¹⁷ Indeed, according to a Hawaiian record, the *Moolelo Hawaii* of 1838, the killing and partial cannibalizing of Cook himself was a sacrifice to the island King Kalani'opu'u (Lewis 2001).
- ¹⁸ Critics of Turner and White have attempted to suggest that this muscle protein could derive from the individual's gastrointestinal tract – but it is an established fact that myoglobin is found only in skeletal and cardiac muscle cells, and not in cells of the blood, skin, connective tissue, vascular tissue, tissues of the lymphatic system, nor in the smooth muscle cells of the digestive system. Human myoglobin can only be present in fecal material if it is consumed and passed through the digestive system by the depositor of the feces. Also, in response to critics who claim the feces could have come from a wolf or coyote, the corprolite bears a distinctive human shape; plus, no canine hair or fragments of chewed bone tissue was found – which is almost inconceivable if this was deposited by a wolf or coyote.
- ¹⁹ The Navajo, for example, have taken exception to stories of Anasazi cannibalism, claiming that the idea goes against their peaceful nature. This is a bit ironic, however, as the Navajo were hardly a peaceful people when these incidents were supposed to have taken place. The Navajo systematically attacked, among others, the Hopi (who, though espousing peaceful avoidance of violence and disputes occasionally engaged in offensive forays as well). Turner (1999, citing Brandt 1974) reports that "Some Hopi say that there are children's bones at Old Oraibi and Hotevilla (in a cave) and that these are from children kidnapped and eaten during famine times.... The most interesting thing about these beliefs is that Hopi consider them credible". Some of these reports date from around 1862. As Sanday reports (citing Luckert (1975)), the Navajo defended themselves valiantly against the Europeans of course, but war parties mounted raids on neighboring groups, and, in most cases, war parties were motivated by the desire for plunder. One critique of the interpretation of cannibalism among prehistoric Indians in the desert Southwest of the U.S. went so far as to say *any* characterization of Indians as cannibals generates ill-will and negative emotions about archaeology in descendant communities, that short of "incontrovertible archaeological evidence" (whatever that might be) for the existence of cannibalism, archaeologists need to think about the broad social and cultural implications of their research. Seems to me archaeologists should do this anyway, but not to the exclusion of honest fact-finding and theorizing, regardless of how sensitive or unpleasant these might be. As Tim White has said (1992), "Just as no person characterizes all American pioneers of the (19th) century as cannibals on the basis of cannibalism among the Donner Party, no person should characterize all Anasazi as cannibals".
- ²⁰ Routledge's footnote here reads as follows: "Since writing the above the following has been seen: 'The higher Polynesian races, such as the Tahitians, Hawaiians, Samoans, had one and all outgrown, and some of them had in part forgot, the practice (cannibalism) before Cook or Bougainville had shown a top-sail in their waters' – *In the South Seas*, R.L. Stevenson.
- ²¹ e.g., Moula-Guercy (on the Rhone River), occupied 100,000 years ago; the Gran Dolina cave in northern Spain, c. 800,000 years ago; Cowboy Wash in southwestern Colorado and Chaco Canyon in west-central New Mexico (mid- to late-12th c. CE); Fontbrégoua in southern France (c. 8,000 BCE), which Bahn describes as "the best documented case yet published for the existence of prehistoric cannibalism" (Defleur, et al., 1999).
- ²² Breakage due to excavation damage and/or sedimentary pressure and natural rock falls during prehistory.
- ²³ A phenomena in which the broken ends of bones become "polished" upon repeated rubbing against the abrasive interior surfaces of rough pottery vessels while boiling. It's important to note that, while the presence of pot polish can support an argument that bones were cooked and stirred in a pot, the absence of pot polish cannot be taken as evidence that stewing did *not* occur – only that vigorous, rolling boiling or stirring were not part of the cooking process. Moreover, pot polishing occurs only on the ends of fragments, not on mid-portions. The physics of pot polish prohibit this. And pot polish doesn't occur on pieces too large to fit in pots (Preston 1998).
- ²⁴ The criteria include massive mutilation and damage to nearly every skeletal element at a site; cut marks similar to those found on butchered animal bone; intentional splitting of long bones (arms and legs) to extract the marrow; massive breakage of the skull and face; some evidence of burning; an absence or scarcity of certain bones; and signs that most of the remains were buried soon after death and showed little evidence of weathering or scavenging by animals.
- ²⁵ Indeed, in a 1997 article in *Science*, Ann Gibbons reports the findings of archaeologists, anthropologists, and other scientists in 125,000-year-old habitation caves near the Klasies River in South Africa. Fossil human remains were found in several layers. Skulls are fire-blackened and other bones show cut marks. These are mixed with kitchen debris. Proximate to this case, even Arens, who has criticized procedures in past excavations where cannibalism has been interpreted to have occurred, says he thinks procedures are more sound and that there is "more evidence for cannibalism than before".
- ²⁶ Gill (1977) notes that "it is well known that fish were *not* offered to (the god Rongo). *His fish were human victims*. In discussing prehistoric rituals on Mangaia, Cook Islands, Steadman (2000) notes that meetings at the Tukituki Mata *marae* were said to have been followed by feasting on the "flesh of fish"; but "tukituki mata" means "to smash someone's face, especially the part containing the eyes"; it's also interesting to note that human sacrificial victims on Mangaia and in the Marquesas Islands were referred to euphemistically as "fish".

²⁷ A.C.E. Caillot, *Histoire de l'île Oparo ou Rapa* (Leroux, 1932).

²⁸ A term almost universally applied to such female ogres is the German *mehschenfresserin* (meaning "devourer of humans"), which in the appraisal of Maria Tatar, reflects the fact that cannibalism was not unknown in times of famine even if it was probably based on superstitious fears about werewolves and witches.

APPENDIX

KURU AND CANNIBALISM

Just as the debate continues to rage about the existence or prevalence of cannibalism, there is some disagreement about one of the most frequently cited pieces of evidence supporting cannibalism as a practice – namely *kuru*. First reported among the Foré of New Guinea in the 1940s, *kuru* was initially described as a "slow virus" because its presentation defied normal, biotic explanations but also took anywhere from half a decade to twenty years or more to manifest. We now know that *kuru* is a disease similar to Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy ("Mad Cow Disease") which itself probably originated from Scrapie (an endemic spongiform encephalopathy of sheep and goats known throughout Europe since the mid-18th c. and so named from the animals trying to "scrape" off their wool or hair). While *kuru* is unique to the Foré, its closest human equivalent is Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (CJD) which, in addition to relatively rare but random occurrences among the general world population (85% have a sporadic etiology), can be contracted through corneal transplants and improperly sterilized surgical equipment. All of these diseases involve a degeneration of brain tissue due to the presence of an infectious, mal-folded version of normal cellular protein – known as a "prion" (pree-ohn). Why some people contract CJD is not known, though it's possible that people who carry two identical genetic copies of the prion protein are more susceptible to developing the disease than people who carry two *unmatched* gene variants.

Kuru among the Foré is particularly important to the cannibalism debate because some evidence indicates one contracts the disease through cannibalistic practices. Reports of Foré funeral ceremonies have been consistent and unequivocal, with the Foré most particularly admitting to engaging in cannibalism for ritual purposes: Women and children consumed diseased relatives as a mark of respect, including brain, viscera, and even powdered bone. Foré men did not partake as much and rarely if ever ingested infected tissue; e.g., brain matter. The men also insisted on the choicest alternative protein sources in their villages, such as domesticated pork, in order to ensure their fighting strength. Foré men resisted eating chickens for the same "reason" they avoided human flesh – because they thought it would make them weak against their enemies. It should be noted that the Foré themselves never believed that cannibalism was the source of *kuru*, even though they never denied participating in cannibalistic rituals; instead, they believed that sorcerers were responsible for the disease (Berndt 1962, who witnessed some aspects of Foré cannibalism). Foré women were by far the most cannibalistic and, subsequently, showed the highest rate of *kuru*, as well as familial aggregation of cases. The Foré did not eat people who died of dysentery or leprosy, nor were all Foré cannibals.

Young children, especially those residing apart from the men in small houses with their mothers, ate what their mothers gave them. Diamond (1997) relates that "highland babies made the fatal mistake of licking their fingers after playing with raw brains that their mothers had just cut out of dead *kuru* victims awaiting cooking". And while Diamond is obviously ignorant of the fact that cooking does not destroy prions, his point is still well taken. At any rate, this would account for the high rate of *kuru* among Foré children regardless of sex. Non-New Guinean residents of the *kuru* area have never contracted the disease; however, natives from non-endemic areas who took up residence in afflicted villages have contracted it.

As Stanley Prusiner (who coined the term "prion") has observed, the decline in the *kuru* epidemic following the cessation of cannibalism in the late 1950s is consistent with the proposed mechanism of transmission: "No individual born in the South Foré after 1959, when cannibalism ceased, has developed *kuru*", he says, nor is there "evidence of case-to-case transmission of *kuru* through routes other than endocannibalism" (Prusiner 2004).

However, while oral transmission of infected tissue has been suggested as the obvious means by which *kuru* was spread among the New Guinea natives, laboratory experiments have failed to transmit *kuru* to non-human primates by this method. Chimps fed infected tissue, in other words, didn't get *kuru* as much as or as rapidly as did chimps who were injected (intra-cerebrally) with infected tissue. This isn't too surprising. Large doses of infected tissue have to be consumed, it seems, for *kuru* to manifest, and *kuru* can take up to 40 years to materialize. At least in primates. Prusiner reports success in infecting hamsters by oral transmission of infected tissue. Of course, humans and chimps or hamsters may be sufficiently different biologically or neurologically that there are few applicable analogues. An alternative hypothesis has, therefore, emerged suggesting that the *kuru* agent might enter the body through abrasions of mucous membranes within the oropharynx or conjunctivae as well as through open wounds on the hands. It is *not* transmitted through blood, however – nor, as Arens implies, is it likely to be transmitted solely by other animals, otherwise *kuru* would still continue. There is no evidence for animal or insect reservoirs (Prusiner 2004).

Not that the alternative hypothesis is needed, since both the Foré and their observers consistently report cannibalistic practices and, as Prusiner has said, "no evidence of case-to-case transmission of *kuru* through routes other than cannibalism" have been documented.

This is a case where we don't have to question the motives or accuracy of observers: The practitioners of ritual, customized cannibalism – the Foré – are un-refuted sources themselves.

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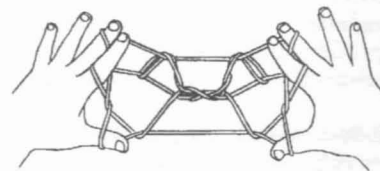
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